Cases: The Furniture of Display (Durham, 10-11 Jan 20)

The Bowes Museum, County Durham, Jan 10–11, 2020
Deadline: Nov 22, 2019

Simon Spier, University of Leeds

Making a Case for Cases: The Furniture of Display

This conference aims to explore the furniture used by collectors, museums and institutions for displaying artefacts. Spanning diverse functions and definitions, objects known as display cases, showcases, china cabinets, vitrines, specimen tables, or even trophy cabinets, are ubiquitous in the home and museum. However, there remains a lack of scholarly engagement with cases in the writing on and about museums, demoting them as merely utilitarian or secondary to the objects they contain. This conference aims to shift the focus from the contained to the container.

From the earliest wunderkammer, treasure houses and royal palaces, collectors and institutions have purchased, or commissioned craftsmen to make furniture to hold possessions or artefacts. With the rise and development of public art museums and large-scale international exhibitions in the nineteenth century, display cases became increasingly central to the aesthetics and practicalities of exhibiting art. As more people jostled to see or touch objects, cabinets were redesigned to fit with new techniques of preservation and display. We might consider the boom in the luxury furniture trade that offered private collectors from a range of social backgrounds the opportunity to decorate their homes and show off their prize pieces. How did public and private display cases mould forms of class and gender identity? How did they balance the need for access with the claims of distinction?

The display case was an invitation to close-looking and even scientific investigation. Types of visual scrutiny were inherently bound up with technological advances and this was mediated through shifts in case design. What were the power dynamics at work when something was placed inside a case, particularly in the imperial context of the nineteenth century, as foreign cultures were subject to study and objects were displaced from their original locations. Which histories do display cases speak to? This event will open a discussion around the topic between historians of any discipline who examine display cases and their role in presenting art and material culture.

The organisers invite abstracts for 20-minute papers and also shorter, in-focus presentations of around 5-8 minutes in length. We welcome papers on topics engaging with (but certainly not limited to):

• Cases in domestic or historic interiors, c.1750-1950
• The different taxonomy of cases: for porcelain, jewellery, taxidermy, documents, coins and

medals, natural history and botanical specimens.
• Uniformity and difference in display cases
• Case design and architecture
• The impact of curators, collectors, artists or dealers on display case design.
• The criteria of cases; for study, classification or aesthetics?
• Display cases and preservation/conservation
• Display cases and Empire
• Display cases in commercial spaces.

Please direct all submissions to casesconference2020@gmail.com by noon on Friday 22 November 2019. The organisers will be in touch with the outcome of applications the following week.

The conference will take place in The Bowes Museum on Friday 10 January and the morning of Saturday 11 January, allowing time for speakers and delegates to arrive via Darlington train station on Friday morning and to leave on Saturday after lunch. With its important collection of furniture used for display purposes, The Bowes Museum offers the ideal venue for this conference. We warmly invite all participants to join us on the afternoon of Saturday 11 January at the museum for extra discussion and activities. Information on arrangements for accommodation will be available in due course.

This conference is generously supported by the Collaborative Doctoral Partnership Consortium and The Bowes Museum.

We look forward to receiving your abstracts. With thanks from the organisers:
Charlotte Johnson (The University of Birmingham and Kedleston Hall, National Trust),
Lindsay Macnaughton (Durham University and The Bowes Museum),
Simon Spier (The University of Leeds and The Bowes Museum)

Reference:

CFP: Cases: The Furniture of Display (Durham, 10-11 Jan 20). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 9, 2019 (accessed Nov 21, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/21781>.